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PORTRAITURE AMONG THE NORTH PACIFIC COAST TRIBES

By GEORGE T. EMMONS

THE distinguishing feature of the old villages of the Indians of the Northwest Coast was the wealth of ornamentation in carving and painting, totemic or emblematic in character, that covered the house fronts, heraldic and mortuary columns, ceremonial dress, personal ornaments, and war, hunting, fishing, and household implements. This ornamentation did not arise from mere love of ostentation, but owed its origin to the peculiar social organization and semi-religious worship of ancestry that controlled every action of the people and manifested itself in the display of the crest and the respect paid to it. The clan was the bond of union that held all together as the nearest blood relations, so its honor and rights were jealously guarded to that degree that life was freely sacrificed in its behalf. Among a highly sensitive, vain and proud people it is not difficult to understand how each clan would try to outdo its neighbors in material display, and the competition thus engendered stimulated artists and produced artisans whose originality of design and skilful handiwork may still be seen in the moss-covered carvings in the abandoned villages and in our museum collections.

Under such conditions it might reasonably be expected that from conventionalized human forms representing prominent chiefs a demand for and a desire to produce their actual likenesses as portrait busts or statues would arise, and this is confirmed by the following stories. Dr J. R. Swanton, in his *Tlingit Myths and Texts*,¹ tells of "The Image That Came to Life," as follows:

"A young chief on the Queen Charlotte islands married, and soon afterwards his wife fell ill. Then he sent around everywhere for the very best shamans. If there were a very fine shaman at a certain village

¹ *Bulletin 39, Bureau of American Ethnology.*

he would send a canoe there to bring him. None of them could help her, however, and after she had been sick for a very long time she died.

"Now the young chief felt very badly over the loss of his wife. He went from place to place after the best carvers in order to have them carve an image of his wife, but no one could make anything to look like her. All this time there was a carver in his own village who could carve much better than all the others. This man met him one day and said, 'You are going from village to village to have wood carved like your wife's face, and you can not find anyone to do it, can you? I have seen your wife a great deal walking along with you. I have never studied her face with the idea that you might want some one to carve it, but I am going to try if you will allow me.'

"Then the carver went after a piece of red cedar and began working upon it. When he was through, he went to the young chief and said, 'Now you can come along and look at it.' He had dressed it just as he used to see the young woman dressed. So the chief went with him, and, when he got inside, he saw his dead wife sitting there just as she used to look. This made him very happy, and he took it home. Then he asked the carver, 'What do I owe you for making this?' and he replied, 'Do as you please about it.' The carver had felt sorry to see how this chief was mourning for his wife, so he said, 'It is because I felt badly for you that I made that. So don't pay me too much for it.' He paid the carver very well, however, both in slaves and in goods.

"Now the chief dressed this image in his wife's clothes, and her marten-skin robe. He felt that his wife had come back to him and treated the image just like her. One day, while he sat mourning very close to the image, he felt it move. His wife had also been very fond of him. At first he thought that the movement was only his imagination, yet he examined it every day, for he thought that at some time it would come to life. When he ate he always had the image close to him.

"After a while the whole village learned that he had this image and all came in to see it. Many could not believe that it was not the woman herself until they had examined it closely.

"One day, after the chief had had it for a long, long time, he examined the body and found it just like that of a human being. Still, although it was alive, it could not move or speak. Some time later, however, the image gave forth a sound from its chest like that of crackling wood, and the man knew that it was ill. When he had some one move it away from the place where it had been sitting they found a small red-cedar tree growing there on top of the flooring. They left it until it

grew to be very large, and it is because of this that cedars on the Queen Charlotte islands are so good. When people up this way look for red cedars and find a good one, they say, 'This looks like the baby of the chief's wife.'

"Every day the image of the young woman grew more like a human being, and, when they heard the story, people from villages far and near came in to look at it and at the young cedar tree growing there, at which they were very much astonished. The woman moved around very little and never got to talk, but her husband dreamed what she wanted to tell him. It was through his dreams that he knew she was talking to him."

"Father" Duncan tells the following story of "The Man With The Wooden Wife":

"At the old Tsimshian winter village of Metlakatla there lived, long ago, a man and his childless wife, who were greatly attached to each other. The husband went hunting for several days, and returning at night he found his wife sitting by the fire, which had burned low. He spoke to her, but received no reply, and when he spoke again she seemed to turn away without answering. Such conduct could only mean that in his absence she had wronged him, so he left the house, launched his canoe, and camped on the opposite shore. In the morning, as he was returning to the village, he met a canoe, and the occupants told him that his wife had died and had been cremated the evening before, so then he knew that it was only her spirit that he had seen the previous evening. He felt very sad, and wishing to remember her always as she was, he carved her image in wood with great truthfulness of features and clothed it as she had last appeared to him seated by the fire, and wherever he went in his canoe he carried it with him."

Before the advent of Europeans, when the natives had only tools of stone and shell, any such refined work as portraiture must have been too difficult of accomplishment to have proved satisfactory, but with the acquisition of iron, latent talent rapidly developed and the Victorian age of this coast was about the middle of the nineteenth century, before the contaminating influences of civilization and commercialism had paralyzed native art and artisanship. The work of this early period in wood, ivory, bone, and metal shows originality of design and accuracy of detail, but it gradually disappeared with the establishment of the Hudson's Bay Company factories and the independent trading posts along the coast, which

resulted in such strong competition in the fur-trade that the natives became independently well off, and in the comparative cheapness of our commercial products they neglected home manufactures. Following the trader came the missionary, who discouraged all social and shamanistic observances and abolished ceremonial paraphernalia. Finally the exploiting of the salmon industry and the establishment of the numerous canneries gave congenial work and a living wage to all, and taught them the value of time and modern methods, but, unfortunately, brought liquor and disease which have crippled them physically, morally, and mentally, destroying their ambition and decimating their ranks.

The accompanying illustration (fig. 5) shows, in the old and generally deserted Kitikshan village of Kitwankool, on the trail leading from Kitwanger on the Skeena to Kitlaghdamokx on the Nass, in British Columbia, what is possibly the best remaining example of a portrait figure. It consists of a comparatively rude body of wood, to which the limbs are joined by wooden dowel-pins and which in turn are jointed at the knees and elbows, so that the figure can be placed in a sitting posture and the arms arranged at will. The feet and hands are carved in one with the tibiae and fore-arms. As the figure was fully clothed, the limbs are simply proportional in size, with little regard for exactness of form. The whole skill of the artist was expended on the features and expression to make them as lifelike as possible. A glance at the illustration will show with what success this was accomplished, while a comparison with the carved human faces in the rear of and above the image will show the great difference between the portrait face and the conventionalized human face of the totem-pole. The image is seated on an old trunk, which is secured, at an elevation of ten feet above the ground, to a totem-pole. The trunk contains the cremated remains of the deceased whose image is shown, and this with the figure was once partly protected by a shelter above and at each side, of which a portion only remains. Originally the figure was clothed, but time and the elements have left only shreds of the body-covering, head-dress, and ceremonial neck-ring of cedar-bark rope. As the face indicates, the deceased was a young man.

He was of the Kon-nah-da clan of the higher class, and in this manner his memory was preserved.

At the Kitikshan village of old Kitzegukela on Skeena river, about thirteen miles below Hazelton, in a typical small wooden



FIG..5.—Effigy of a young man seated on a box containing the cremated remains of the deceased at Kitwankool, British Columbia.

grave-house, is a most lifelike image of a man who committed suicide. The body of the figure is completely clothed and has a cap on the head; it is seated in a chair on the box that contains the

cremated remains. In the right hand, with butt resting on the floor, is an old type of Hudson's Bay Company's musket; in the left hand, extended, were the bullets with which he shot himself. The carved face of cedar, which has weathered to a light-brown shade approximating the complexion of the people, is so lifelike and the pose of the figure so natural that on seeing it suddenly through the small window of the house one instinctively draws back in surprise, thinking that it is a lifeless body exposed to view.

In the Nishkar village of Aiyansh, on Nass river, I was shown a wooden figure, rude in body, with jointed limbs, but expressive in features, similar to the two figures seen among the Kitikshan. This was not exposed as a grave figure, although it might originally have been made for that purpose. The family in whose possession it was, said that it represented a chief who had been killed by the Haida about four generations before, and that at family feasts it was exhibited clothed, in memory of the dead.

These three portrait busts or images are all that I found among the Kitikshan and the Nishkar, although the people told me that some years ago there were two similar figures placed on posts, one on the old trail from Kitwankool to Nass river, and the other on the trail between Hazelton and Kisgagass, at the mouth of Babine river, at points where men had died on the trail and had been cremated.

These figures are called *kitumghun*, "man of wood," and were rare on account of their expense. They were always made with jointed limbs, so that they could be placed in different positions, but, so far as I know, were always seated. In some instances the hair of the deceased was cut off and locks thereof inserted and pegged into small holes in the head of wood. While the Tsimshian are said to have possessed such figures, no sign of them remains, as these people have wholly abandoned their primitive mode of life.

From an experience of twenty-five years among the Tlingit of Alaska I have found no evidence that this custom ever existed among them, though they placed figures of human form, representing spirits, in proximity to the grave-houses of the shamans to guard them from evil. The most realistic handiwork of the Tlingit is shown in the masks of the shaman that express sex, age, pain,

death, and many emotions with wonderful fidelity. But while the artist in his conception must have had individual faces in mind, as they too were supposed to represent spirits seen only in dreams of the practitioner, they could not be accounted as likenesses.

So far as the Haida are concerned, neither Dr Swanton nor Dr Newcombe of Victoria, who are the leading authorities on this people and the Queen Charlotte islanders, have any knowledge of separate portrait figures like those found on the Skeena and Nass rivers, except in one instance, cited by Dr Newcombe, where a chief of the village of Skidegate, on Graham island, when visiting Victoria, about 1870, was arrested, imprisoned, and fined for disorderly conduct when under the influence of liquor. Returning home, smarting under the disgrace of confinement and the pecuniary loss sustained, he conceived the idea of humiliating the court by having the image of the judge carved and placed on one of his house-posts and that of the clerk of the court on



FIG. 6.—Ceremonial head-dress mask representing the bust of the deceased daughter of a Haida chief.

the other, so that when he or his friends passed they would speak to the figures in derision and make insulting remarks about those they were designed to represent. This, according to native law, removed the disgrace from the owner's shoulders and subjected the court to ridicule. Whether or not these figures expressed exactness of feature, I cannot say. Unquestionably they were made as nearly recognizable as possible, and I understand that they exhibited a striking resem-

blance, but their identification was made more certain by the carved drapery representing the long black frock-coat and high hat of the judge, and the peaked cap of the clerk.



FIG. 7.—Skoolkah's house and totem-pole, Howkan, Alaska, 1888.

Possible instances in two carved wood head-dress masks in the United States National Museum show female faces wonderfully realistic and individual in feature and expression. Both of these are of Haida workmanship. One (fig. 6) presents the bust of a young girl naturally posed and dressed in the style of a generation ago; it is said to represent the favorite daughter of a Haida chief whose untimely death so saddened the father that he had her image carved in this manner in order that he might wear it on ceremonial occasions on the front of his head-dress. The other mask (pl. x), which is attached to the ceremonial head-dress, presents likewise the face of a young girl, named Soodatl, the daughter of a Skidegate

chief. The face is ornamentally inlaid with small rectangles of the much-prized blue-green halotis shell in imitation of the old custom, which prevailed among the higher classes, of sticking on the face, with spruce-gum, such small sections of this shell. These two carvings occurring on this type of family head-dress are remarkable, as the ornamentation of the wooden mask is invariably



PORTRAIT MASK OF SOODATL, DAUGHTER OF A SKIDEGATE CHIEF

totemic in character, representing the clan crest and generally in animal design.

The many human figures that appear on totem-poles, mortuary columns, and house-posts must be wholly dissociated from portrait figures. These, whether representing mythical heroes or individuals known to the villagers at the time of their execution, are conventionalized forms, and while typically correct are expressionless and show no attempt to specialize particular features. Their identification or recognition depends wholly on their position, context, or association with crest or other figures.

In the Haida village of Howkan, on Prince of Wales island, is still preserved the totem-pole of Chief Skoolkah, upon which is represented the uniformed figure, with a long beard, of a military official of Sitka who had extended some kindness to a former member of this family (fig. 7). The beard and uniform identify the white man and the official. No attempt at a likeness could have been attempted, as the artist, who lived at a later period, could hardly have seen his subject.

In painting and weaving portraiture was never attempted by the Northwest Coast tribes. Foreshortening and shading were neither understood nor practised, and human figures were seldom employed except as grotesque forms on the shaman's dress. Animal forms predominated and were either realistic in outline or else highly conventionalized, exaggerated, dissected, or separated to that degree that they are unintelligible to the present generation.